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Behind the Smoke-Screen

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Panel: Reflections on a Global Year: The Worldview, Post 9/11

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Behind the Smoke-Screen

A sudden unleashing of grotesque violence: Sept. 11, flashes in my mind the image of a mad dog, rushing frantically to bite and die.

I have always been much more interested in the subconscious, in nightmares and dreams of reality that dance at the deeper level of our being. Indeed, the external, one might say, is a manifestation of what goes on deep down in the subterranean. But most of the times the apparent or the obvious is so manipulated that the suppressed and compromised real stuff may become a demon waiting to strike back at the opportune time. The demon is our own creation—created by the layers of lies, the pretension, hypocrisy or even diplomacy of the surface.

September 11, I believe, witnessed the striking of the demon, rising from the hell-hole of the subconscious of international polity—the face given to the demon is bearded, has the transcendental expression of a pir, a saint, is almost suave, his eyes projecting the toughness and calm of steadfast conviction and has a winsome smile. An epic hero or a charismatic villain! An attractive man arousing terror and causing psychic devastation, creating victims who died and survivors who are crushed with memory.

On the evening of Sept. 11 (morning in New York), as I switched on the television and saw the image of an airplane crashing into the tall beautiful American building, I at once dismissed the sight as fiction, as yet another of those aesthetically worked out obscene scenes of violence from a Hollywood blockbuster. Someone in the room screamed “This is news...this could be the beginning of the 3rd world war!” A nightmare inside out, with all its gory details! Of course, we in India, see the insides of so many nightmares that there’s a fatalistic acceptance of the same. But for it to have happened out there in New York, to the American citadel of innocence—securely housed in the complacency of affluence and the everyday-routine, technologically well-supported existence with a plethora of mechanisms of safety alerts. The suddenness of this event matched a natural calamity...the creation of a big historic moment, perhaps the marker of another calendar for humanity like Hizr or Nanakshahi, repeatedly drummed all over the world by the noisy media overplay of the event. Earlier the metaphor of ‘war’ on terror was extensively used and later, now, comes the metaphor of peace, as exploring moral justification for revenge and more violence. Suggesting a Gandhian stance for a non-Gandhian action programme!

One asks, would there be any respect for the sovereignty of any nation then or any respect for borders, in this terrifying war which is on terror? The terror of war on terror! As though the most powerful nation in the world was waiting to get this opportunity!

The boundary between the real and the surreal seems to have crumbled. In Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot", Godot is most present precisely because of his pressing absence. For me the meaning of the play has now come alive very differently. The experience is that of the concreteness of abstraction. The abstraction of the enemy? Not identified with a country. Where is the enemy? As a poet, I'm no good at political analysis. But what I'm interested is in understanding the world-wide psychosis created by terror embodied in individuals who can render a big economic and political power like America desperate and helpless. What I am intrigued by is the creation of a breed of people who can be living anywhere and everywhere in the world in whom the instinct for survival has been overtaken by a death wish. There's no clash of civilizations here, only caricatures of civilizations leading to the absurd but real globalization of terror and of helplessness.

This is cause enough to re-assert the value of literature in a world that is fast moving into paranoia, neurosis and even insanity. This brings to my mind Saadat Hasan Manto's great story "Toba Tek Singh" in which the mad men in the lunatic asylum refuse to leave their homeland, defy the political madness of Partition of India and present sanity in the face of the mayhem outside the asylum. Sept. 11, too, will churn out creative metaphors and stories when writers have digested this event more fully.

We have to pause and raise fundamental and existential questions all over again: Who am I, Why am I and Where am I heading?

As individuals, as nations and as communities, we have to reclaim the dignity of human existence, get our choices back and evolve an aesthetics of living, not through show of power or terror, but through a sharing of both adversity as well as prosperity amongst all humanity. And for that, inevitably, we have to have empathy, understanding and compassion. This is in fact the job of literature; not of carrying didactic messages but creating awareness and sensitivities...taking us behind the smokescreen.

The writer locates delicate silences, exiled emotions and the discarded human subjectivity lost in the larger discourse of history. 1947: 16 million people lost their homes. 2 million were killed, thousands of women were raped and thousands committed suicide in terror. That was Partition in India. It seemed to have happened suddenly. More than 50 years have gone by and today we discover a whole body of literature dealing with its reality and the aftermath...We can expect something similar happening here too, to enable us to clearly understand and see the absurdity of the event in relation to routine life and the ordinary person of the street.

I'd like to end with a poem of mine:

Unloyal Memory

Each time
I look back,
Open the locks
enter the room
clear the cobwebs

I see more
but
hold something less in my hands.